

Uncertainty and Complexity: Beyond Bullshit Narratives

Longer Title ...

“... in these times of uncertainty ...”
 “... in complexity ...”
 ... and ...
 ... the colonial presumptuousness of those who author our narratives ...

For the sake of our health, it is essential, not merely important, to Question the colonial presumptuousness of those who author some of the narratives that currently pervade life in organisations, and indeed in society.

So ...

“We are living in uncertain times,” ... proclaims the “expert”, confidently describing the ways of the modern world.

“Well ... of course we are,” I say in response. “Such is life. What, after all is certain in life?”

“Here, we are working in complexity,” ... proclaims the “expert”, confidently explaining the client’s problems, while portraying their ... erm ... knowledge.

“What utter nonsense,” I say in response. “Life generally, and therefore in any organisation, comprises collections of interdependent relationships, and as such, is complex by nature. The term ‘in complexity’ is meaningless.”

Simplistic reductionism serves nobody.

Neither does pseudo-scientific posturing.

A reduction in such colonial-style pretentiousness might be of service to us all.

Only when we explicitly recognise the nature of our world, are we in a position to support people in dealing with relational issues.

Let’s clarify ...

* * *

It was still dark as Lena quietly tiptoed down the stairs, afraid of waking up the others sleeping fitfully. Only after stepping outside did she put on her shoes. Then, walking nervously towards the station with her few belongings slung over her shoulder in a small bag, she continuously looked over her shoulder afraid that she was being followed. Although she had a passport and the required travel documents, who knew what the men in uniform would say or do when they checked her? Who knew what the other men in uniform would say or do when she reached the border? Who knew whether she would then be able to catch a boat to her destination, which she hoped, would finally free her from the terror and threats that had become integral to her life at home, the only place she had ever known in her 21 years of life? And who knew whether the rulers of the land of her destination would even allow her boat, if she could get one, to enter its waters, let alone permit its passengers to disembark? Lena had no idea how long this journey would last. She also had no idea how she would find food on the way. She had a little money, but certainly not enough for a long-drawn-out journey. She had no idea who she could really trust. Were the people offering to help genuine in their intentions, or were they possibly undercover representatives of the authorities in her homeland, people with the power to arrest and imprison and even murder her without legal process?

* * *

Who is or was Lena?

... Is she a refugee in the 21st century attempting to escape the oppression in Afghanistan or Syria or ... Libya or Myanmar or Russia or ...?

... Is she a refugee who, in the 20th century, managed to escape one of the numerous military dictatorships in Latin America?

... Is she a refugee who managed to escape Idi Amin's persecution of Ugandan citizens of Asian origin in the 1970s?

... Was she a refugee who managed to escape the slaughters practiced by Hindus and Muslims on one another in 1947 following the partition of the former British colony into countries that were then named India and Pakistan?

Lena could be any of these people.

She could also be one of millions of other people with a similar story.

She could have lived during any century going back thousands of years.

Little in life is certain.

Here, however, we can confidently ascertain that life for Lena was indeed uncertain, entailing a degree of complexity that is probably unimaginable to anyone who has not been a refugee.

* * *

So ... Who was Lena?

Lena (not her real name) was a childhood friend of my mother who told me her story when I met her during my first visit to Israel in 1973. Like my mother, she felt forced to escape her homeland in 1935, leaving behind her parents and numerous other relatives who simply did not want to believe the reality of the Nazi terror sweeping through Berlin and the rest of Germany. Lena never again saw her parents.

I never met my grandparents. I never met the vast majority of my ancestors.

All were murdered by the Nazis during the 1930s and 1940s.

* * *

During the 1930s, the period of Lena's escape, the whole world was highly **volatile**.

The **uncertainty** that pervaded life throughout the world was certain to greet anybody fortunate enough to wake up from their sleep.

Even with my family's history embedded in my bones, I personally feel challenged to imagine the **complexity** entailed in simply being able to stay alive, not knowing where to get food, perhaps even water, while continuously under the threat of being killed, without a place to call home, perhaps even without a roof over one's head.

The **ambiguity** and potential ambiguity in every single interaction ... *Who could one really trust?* ... can probably only be imagined by those unfortunate enough to have personally experienced being the victims of war and persecution.

Volatile. Uncertain. Complex. Ambiguous.

Did people speak of VUCA during the 1930s and 1940s?

Almost certainly not.

They had far more pressing matters to consider than vacuous acronymic bullshit.

We'll return to VUCA later.

* * *

Helpful Consultants for Our Uncertain Early 21st Century World

Today, early in the third decade of the 21st century, we are indeed living *in times of uncertainty*.
Of course, we are.
How could we not be?

... such is life ...

Today's corporate and political environments are teeming with "expert" "consultants" who, quite selflessly ... for a not-so-small fee ... offer to help us "navigate" these times.
It is certainly a mystery how human beings managed to survive prior to the age of these experts.

Yet they did ... for one simple reason ...

***We have always lived in times of uncertainty ...
... because ...
... with change being the oxygen that gives life to life ...
... the outcomes of changes ... therefore life ... are always uncertain ...
... such is the nature of life.***

Whatever happened in the past has already happened ... events which we interpret through the naturally-limiting lens of our own lives to date.

Whatever is happening now is happening ... events which we interpret through the lens of our own lives to date.

Whatever is going to happen in the future is ... going to happen. We may guess the outcomes of particular actions and activities. We may act with the intention of achieving a specific outcome. We may hope for specific outcomes, we may predict them, we may run reams of data through specifically designed programmes to make these predictions. Nevertheless ... all outcomes are unknown. Nobody can realistically claim to "know" what will happen. Future outcomes are uncertain.

...

...

But ... claim these "expert consultants", when challenged, brandishing their expertly crafted expert data-crunching models ... "*we are living in unique times*". They have never been experienced before. The complexity we face is unique.

This too is true.

Inevitably.

All times are unique ... wherever in the world we may find ourselves.

... this too is the nature of the world ...

* * *

***"... in these times of uncertainty ..."* illustrated**

Let's illustrate this idea ... by considering a small ... a very small selection of examples of "*times of uncertainty*" in the world ... times of uncertainty for individuals ... for groups of individuals ... for whole regions of the world ...

...

...

...

The 1990s, the period immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union ... in Europe, as well as some other regions of the world.

... in these times of uncertainty ...

The late 1960s and early 1970s, a unique period in the western world denoted by rebellion against established political and educational structures.

... in these times of uncertainty ...

It was while working in the country in 2009 that Kanoa told me of her life growing up in a village in central Laos, where over one-third of the adults had lost at least one limb as a result of entering fields peppered with the landmines planted there in the 1960s by the US army during what is locally known as the American War.

... in these times of uncertainty ...

Early 1979. I was a young naïve carefree traveller, backpacking in Mexico. Late one afternoon I went into a café to shelter from the rain and was soon joined at the table by another young guy. As I lit the candle on the table after lighting a cigarette, he began shouting hysterically for me to put it out. I learned that, as a result of his experiences as a conscripted soldier in the Vietnam War (or the American War as people from South-East Asia refer to this period), he was traumatised by the flames of fire. I have no idea whether he ever found peace.

... in these times of uncertainty ...

It was in 1976 that I met Armando. He told us the story of his escape from the terror in Angola, where he was born and came of age, his home. During the war of independence from Portugal (Armando supported independence but not war), anybody who was perceived as 'white' was sought out and slaughtered. He told of the illegal border crossings, being treated as a pariah wherever he went, of feeling homeless. In 1979, I visited him in Belo Horizonte where he had joined his parents in trying to build a new life. He still felt restless, lacking roots.

... in these times of uncertainty ...

In the 1970s, 21-year-old Alfonso was imprisoned in Argentina for participating in a local group advocating for democracy and freedom. He was lucky, and released without being tortured, finally finding his way to Europe to seek asylum. Many of his friends were murdered. Alfonso's is merely one example of the countless stories told to me by friends and their friends, of imprisonment and finally escape from the brutal military dictatorships in Latin American during the 1970s.

... in these times of uncertainty ...

It is 1945. World War II is finally over. Europe is a pile of rubble, with millions of refugees moving in all directions simultaneously, some trying to return to a place they once called home, some trying to escape from a place they once called home out of fear for what might come. Would they be able to escape? Would they even find food and water to survive until the next day?

... in these times of uncertainty ...

My mother's father was conscripted into the army in 1914 to fight in World War I. I was about 10 years old when she mentioned the stories her father had told her after returning. He, of course, never

knew whether he would return. Very many of their neighbours didn't. Millions of human beings were killed in countless slaughters perpetrated in the name of ... I'm not sure what to be perfectly honest. This was supposedly the "war to end all wars". 1939, a mere 21 years after the end of the First World War, marked the start of World War II.

... in these times of uncertainty ...

Between 1845-1852, the potato famine ravaged Ireland. What would the poor people eat, merely to be able to stay alive? As for those who decided to leave their homeland for America, knowing they would never be able to return ... what awaited them there ... if they even survived the Atlantic crossing?

... in these times of uncertainty ...

15th Century Spain: Would the Jewish family escaping the inquisitions survive to tell the tale or would they be captured and murdered while attempting to reach a boat that would take them to unknown shores ... or ... to the bottom of the ocean ...?

... in these times of uncertainty ...

Medieval England: Imagine the strong young farmer working in the fields with his father as he heard galloping horses and saw the soldiers. Dropping his tools, he headed for the woods. Would he escape the clutches of the King's horsemen rounding up soldiers for the next war? And what would happen to the women of the village? What would become of the older men when the soldiers realised that the young ones had escaped? And the children?

... in these times of uncertainty ...

Any day in the 19th century: How would the day end for the villagers in West Africa? Would they sleep at home or be captured, to be later sold as slaves in America or the Caribbean?

... in these times of uncertainty ...

Any day during the 16th/17th/18th/19th/20th century in Africa, or Asia or the lands we today call Latin America or Canada or the USA or Australia or New Zealand or an island in the Pacific Ocean, or ... Imagine ... being a villager, simply living your life among your community. You know your land has been colonised, stolen by others more powerful. What would these powerful colonial masters demand of you and your relatives and friends tomorrow?

... in these times of uncertainty ...

In 1993, Anni Wolf, an old friend of my mother from Berlin who also fled Nazi persecution, described her life in Israel: *"In the 57 years that I have been living here [in Israel], I have experienced very few periods of calm."*

... in these times of uncertainty ...

These examples are merely a fraction of those I personally could relate. Each reader will be able to tell their own stories, some experienced, others heard.

Each story is unique.

Each experience of each event is unique.
 Each context is unique.
 Each period of time forms part of the context that is unique.

Regardless of how others may describe any particular period in which humans have inhabited our earth, the future, even tomorrow, is never ... ever ... certain.

“Uncertainty” and “Complexity” in the 21st Century Business World

Let’s return to our “expert consultants” in the business world.
 Many would claim this context, the business world, is special.
 It’s not.
 Business too, in whichever form it may be practiced, has always been part of life.

Just consider the ubiquitous market place in the town square.
 We can find them almost anywhere ... as we always could in centuries gone by.

Today, we generally use “the business world” to describe an arena that is denoted by the complex interrelationships among producers, financiers, politicians, service providers and more, spread throughout the world.
 Each of these groups comprise collections of highly complex individual human beings, operating in a complex web of relationships that begin “at home” and naturally increase in complexity as the web encompasses others further afield.
 The nature of these interrelationships may be so complex and nebulous that our “expert consultants” are frequently inclined to describe the context of our working lives using the scientific-sounding albeit meaningless expression ... “*in complexity*” ... which ... of course ... they will quite selflessly, help us to “navigate” for a not-so-small fee. These times are, after all, “unique”.

Before drowning in the populist narrative that proclaims living and/or working “*in complexity*” is in some way special or unique ...

... I suggest we pause for a moment ...

...

... to consider ...

...

... the degree of complexity in the life of any refugee attempting to merely survive, stay alive, while being pursued by those intent on persecuting them and/or taking advantage of them ... without food, without knowing where to get clean water to drink, without shelter from the cold or the heat, without even knowing how to reach a destination they may never reach, without even knowing whether this destination will indeed be safe for them, without knowing whether they can trust the person offering them help, perhaps having lost their family, perhaps without those pieces of paper we refer to as identity-cards/passports/visas.

This refugee could be living in 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1990, 2000, 2020, 1850, 1580, 1750, 2030.

Let’s remind ourselves ...

Life comprises collections of interdependent relationships, and as such, is complex by nature.

Using the static term “*in complexity*” to describe any context in a living, dynamic, system ... for example, an organisation, a corporation, society ... stamps upon the liv-*ing* of the life in the system.

Such (ab)use of language actually constitutes a wonderfully clear example of objectification. Exacerbating this abuse in order to sell services based on such claims is at the very least, a display of a lack of awareness of the nature of our world. If done knowingly, while claiming to explicitly recognise the dynamic nature of life, it becomes ethically questionable.

So, what about VUCA ...?

... this Volatility ... Uncertainty ... Complexity ... Ambiguity ... that ... supposedly ... describes our modern world so ... erm ... clearly ...

The term was coined by the US military to denote the state of the world following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Countless businesspeople, politicians and consultants have pounced upon this apparently convenient simplistic explanation to denote our times and offer so-called “solutions” to overcome/navigate these times. Regardless of opinions on the quality of these “solutions”, the basis for them is fallacious.

Because ...

VUCA does not describe the world following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

It describes how the US-military-machine perceived the world following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Suddenly, they found themselves unable to predictably identify an enemy that justified their existence.

This distinction is essential.

Furthermore, we, as citizens, need to recognise that in supposedly providing an “explanation” of the world, the US military has effectively colonised the public perspective ... very persuasively ... by spreading a description that suited their purposes. They have created a new narrative.

VUCA does not describe our world.

VUCA has never described our world.

The nature of our world is far too complex to be reduced to populist, and in this case, violent acronyms.

Who controls the narratives that pervade our world?

Why?

How?

Let’s look briefly at some patterns of colonisation and what we might describe as colonial-style behaviour.

One key characteristic is the assumption, an assumption that is simultaneously arrogant, ignorant, toxic and simply wrong, that one group of people has the right to decide over the lives of others and that their views are somehow “superior” to others.

Such behaviour amounts to the violent abuse of power.

An additional characteristic of these patterns is the assumption that so-called “information” originating from particular “recognised sources” has more value than that from other sources simply because of the status of these sources. Such “recognised sources” include: leaders of sects,

frequently referred to as religions; those holding academic titles such as Professor or Doctor; senior executives of national and international institutions, and large corporations; political leaders; studies using scientific method, regardless of whether the context and content and substance of the study is actually scientific or pseudo-scientific or even meaningful.

We could describe this inappropriate and manipulative abuse of status as violent abuse of power.

The narrative: *"in these times of uncertainty" ...*

A short time ago, I noticed a social media post in which someone had written the following on a flipchart: *"What is home in these times of uncertainty?"* Now, I know this person, having long admired their work which displays a clear understanding of the complex relational nature of our world, a world in which nothing can be certain because cause and effect in natural (as opposed to mechanical) interactions can hardly ever be clearly specified. Having held countless wonderful conversations with them, I felt so disappointed when I saw this. I also felt some anger. The Question is manipulative, populist and colonial.

"What is home?" is a great Question ... one that may cover highly complex multiple realities. It's a Question that, due to the history of my family, has become ingrained in my bones and in my cells, accompanying me throughout my life. It is alive ... in the experience that is the experience of my life.

For a person with a huge following to abuse this Question, somehow pretending to be able to offer insights into the complex nature of life for those who face it, by adding the meaningless suffix *"... in these times of uncertainty" ...* is misguided if not presumptuous.

Here we have colonialism in action ... an abuse of the power that the popularity of narratives conveys upon their authors.

Who controls the narrative?

Inevitably, it is those who hold some form of power, whether the source of this power is force, or democratic process, or influence ... which in so many cases, arises from manipulation.

We could ask ourselves ...

"To what extent should we take seriously the narratives brought into the world by those with power and/or influence?"

Perhaps we should add some nuance here ...

Because these narratives are being spread by those with power and/or influence it is undoubtedly very important to take them seriously. This does not mean, however, that we should automatically follow them.

We absolutely need to Question them before making any decisions ... precisely because the complex nature of the world is likely to render simple narratives invalid.

Failure to Question narratives may be harmful to personal health, personal well-being, organisation health, indeed society health.

Ultimately, failure to Question narratives may lead to violent conflict, even war.



We can never “know” what the storm will bring.

We do indeed live *“in these times of uncertainty”*.

We always have and we always will.

Those who follow us in future generations will also live *“in these times of uncertainty”*.

Such is life.

Nothing is certain.

We are living in *“a complex world”*.

We always have and we always will.

Those who follow us in future generations will also live *“a complex world”*.

Such is life ... the natural ... nature of our world.

We are doing nothing whatsoever *“in complexity”*.

We never have and we never will.

Whatever we may do, we do in the aliveness of our world ... while participating ... and here we have what we may describe as the *liv-ing* complexity of our world ...

Let's open up.

Let's Question narratives ... all of them ... continuously.

We may or may not decide to follow them ... or dismiss them.

Let's broaden our perspectives and insights into life by finding and asking Questions we may not have considered before.

The dynamic nature of life means that so much will always remain unknown ...

Let's Cultivate Healthy Organisations ...

Let's Cultivate Healthy Societies ...

... by leaving so-called explanatory models behind us ...

... and actively working with life's natural dynamic ... incorporating the wisdom ... often subdued ... inherent in any group ...

...

... enabling us to thrive in our naturally uncertain and complex world.